DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 206 IR 011 482

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TITLE Evaluating the Individualized Learning Lab (1).
PUB DATE 12 Dec 84
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; College Students; Higher Education; *Individualized Instruction; *Instructional Materials; *Learning Laboratories; Open Enrollment; Program Evaluation; *Remedial Programs; Skill Development
IDENTIFIERS University of Wisconsin Parkside

ABSTRACT

The Learning Laboratory component of the Department of Educational Program Support at the University of Wisconsin at Parkside was evaluated during the academic year 1983-1984 to monitor laboratory and material usage, determine from what areas students were referred, and identify their reasons for laboratory use. The laboratory was part of a support program for diagnosing students' problems and developing or remediating their skills in English, writing, math, reading, and study skills. Using the laboratory log and a learning laboratory participation report completed by 357 students, it was determined that out of 1,785 laboratory uses recorded, the majority of students (82%) were sent from freshman writing classes. English grammar and usage skills resources were the most used (77%). Materials were also rated by students on appeal, pace, learning value, clarity, and importance of learning. The results suggest that students are generally pleased with the laboratory facilities and resources, but that, although the laboratory was publicized, few students above the freshman level made use of it. This report includes the Learning Lab Participation Report form completed by students. (LMM)

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Evaluating the Individualized Learning Lab (1)

by

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IR011482

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ABSTRACT

In a unversity with an open-admissions policy, students enroll with a variety of skills, assets and limitations. There is also the growing concern about retention in non-open-admissions universities. Special support services which enable students to be successful are often needed. This paper is an attempt to evaluate, partially, one such program by looking at students' usage of the facility and students' opinions about the resources provided at the facility.

Introduction

In a university with an open-admissions policy, students enroll with a variety of skills, assets and limitations. There is also the growing concern about retention in non-open-admissions universities. Special support services which enable students to be successful are often needed. At the University of Wisconsin at Parkside, the atttempt to fulfill this need is made by the Department of Educational Program Support. It has four major components: 1) the Tutoring Center; 2) teaching of developmental and remedial English, writing, math, reading and study skills classes; 3) competence testing; and, 4) the Learning Laboratory. This paper is about the Learning Laboratory component of Education Program Support.

Located in the Wyllie Library-Learning Center, the Learning Laboratory was developed to: 1) diagnose students' problems in the areas of English, writing, math, reading and study skills; 2) provide students with educational resources to develop/remediate students' skills in these areas; and, 3) provide for students' self-development.

Student Referral

Students are referred to the lab generally in one of two ways. A great deal of public relations efforts are made by the Lab Coordinator. Tours of the Lab's facilities are arranged and conducted for University faculty and staff. There is much advertising: brochures placed at strategic locations; posters hung in prominent places; and, newspaper items placed in school

and local newspapers often.

After a high visibility has been created, students are either referred by a faculty or staff member or are self-referred (drop-ins). Once faculty and staff are aware of what the Lab offers and they find their students are having certain problems, they then refer students to the Lab. On other occasions, students may sense they have problems and seek help at the Lab.On the other hand, students may just want to "brush up" on certain skills and come to the Lab for that,e.g., one student came regularly to increase his knowledge of word problems in math although he was not enrolled in a math class.

Staffing

The Lab staff roughly falls into two categories: professional and para-professional. The Lab Coordinator, who is also a Reading Specialist, trains the para-professionals (Lab Assistants) to be of assistance to students. The Lab Assistants aid students in locating educational resources based on: 1) specific assignments by course instructors or other professional staff; 2) recommendations by professional Lab staff; and/or 3) problem areas identified by the students themselves.

Professional Lab staff are specialists who also teach the skills classes offered by Educational Program Support. These specialists (Reading, Writing, Study Skills and English) are consulted by students with problems, especially those with non-articulated problems. Many of the students know they have a problem, but they have not been able to isolate the specific nature of the problem. It is then a professional specialist

becomes vital. Once the specialist has helped the student isolate her/his problem, usually through interview and/or diagnostic testing, the specialist recommends specific Lab learning resources to remedy the difficulty.

Assessment

As a matter of routine, several records are kept in order to monitor Lab and material usage. Student progress files are also kept so that students and interested faculty/staff may see how the students are doing. However, for purposes of this report, only data from the Lab log and the "Learning Lab Participation Report" will be presented. Following, is a discussion of the analysis of some of the data garnered from these two sources. After presentation of the analysis, some conclusions and implications for Lab services at the University of Wisconsin at Parkside and for the System in general will be drawn. Then, recommendations will be made for further service and study.

In order for the program to determine the number of students frequenting the Lab, individuals sign a Lab log indicating date, name, referral source and reason for using the Lab. Data from sign-in sheets (academic year 1983-84) indicate a total of 1785 Lab uses. Lab uses were about evenly divided between remedial (49%) and non-remedial students (51%). The number of minority student uses was 334(19%). The actual number of mminority students who used the Lab was 76 out of a total minority enrollment of 333.

Not all students who used the Lab were required to complete

the "Learning Lab Participation Report" (copy of which is attached). The reading skills courses were conducted in the Lab, and the students enrolled in these courses were required to use lab materials during and outside the classes to fulfill individualized contracts. So, it was decided not to have these students evaluate Lab materials except as part of the students' end-of-the-semester evaluation of class, materials and teacher. Therefore, the following analysis is based on 357 cases.

From what areas were students referred, and what learning resources did they use? The overwhelming majority (82%) were sent from freshmen writing classes (See Figure One). The remainder (17%) came from Educational Program Support skills classes. As might be expected, the learning resources used most (77%) were those designed to help students improve English grammar and usage skills.

Figure 1

Referrals to Lab by Course

	No.	%		No.	%
Skills Courses:			Freshman Level:		
English	28	7.8	Basic Writing	245	68.6
Reading	27	7.5	English Comp.	48	13.4
Study Skills	1	.3			
	61	17.0		293	82.0

How did students evaluate the learning resources? Students Learning Lab were asked to respond to five evaluative questions regarding the learning resources they used and also to give any comments or recommendations they might wish to make. The answers have been summarized in Figure Two.

Figure 2

Students' Rating of Lab Materials

Appeal of Resource	Interesting (82%)
Pace of Resource	Just Right (68%)
Learning Value of Resource	Something (57%)
Clarity of Resource	Clear (87%)
Importance of Learning	Very Important (28%)
	Important (44%)

Fifteen per cent considered the learning resource extremely interesting; while the majority (82%) found the learning resource interesting or somewhat interesting. There were only a few (10%) who found the resoure uninteresting or boring. Most of the respondents (68%) thought the materials they used were paced just right, but 20% felt the materials were paced a little too slow. Fifty-seven per cent felt they learned at least something, and 33% felt they learned a great deal from using the materials. Forty per cent found the materials very clear in presentation,

and 47% found the materials to be clear in presentation. Only eight per cent found the materials slighly confusing. The students did find what they learned from the resource to be important (very important, 28%; important, 44%; generally important, 24%).

Most of the students (79%) did not make any comments; however, there were some interesting comments and suggestions made which should be noted. There was a suggestion that the materials were out of date, especially the math materials. One or two students lamented that there were not enough materials devoted to spelling practice.

Findings

The large number of students referred from the writing classes should be a cause for concern. It might be that these students should be in the skills classes as oppposed to the writing classes. It is good to note, however, that so many of them are coming to the Learning Lab to improve their skills.

It is interesting to note that no students from classes above the freshman level are referred to or drop into the Lab. It is difficult to conceive that some of them could not make profitable use of the Lab. Perhaps the Lab has a stigma of being a place where "dumb" people have to go, and students beyond the freshman level are ashamed to be associated with it. The fact that more math students are not coming might indicate that, indeed, the math materials are too old.

Implications and Recommendations

The results of this study have implications for the University of Wisconsin at Parkside, the Wisconsin University System and higher education special support services. It would seem that the students who do make use of the Lab facilities and materials are generally pleased with them. However, it is appropriate that every effort should be made to keep the learning resources as up-to-date as possible.

There seemed to have been much effort put into publicizing the Lab. Yet, too few students above the freshman level made use of the Lab. This suggests that more rigorous publicity efforts might be made. This publicity should have as much emphasis on the positive aspects of the Learning Lab, e.g., programs which help students enhance skills in research and paper writing.

It would seem appropriate to continue on-going assessment of the Learning Lab. In addition to student assessment, the study should include: evaluation by faculty and other university staff; some measure of how much students learned as a result of using Learning Lab resources; and, a measure of impact on the retention and success rates of students.

Conclusion

In many ways, the Learning Lab is attempting to meet the needs of students with varying abilities and backgrounds. As students meet success in college, the importance of this availaable assistance is reinforced. Therefore, it is felt that

the Learning Lab as well as Educational Program Support should remain an integral part of the University system.

APPENDIX

LEARNING LAB PARTICIPATION REPORT

Student Name:_____SSN:_____

Instructor:_____Course:_____Date:_____

Date of Lab Visit:_____Time In:____Time Out:___Total Time:

Learning Resource:_____Call No.:_____

EVALUATION

Directions: Please circle the most appropriate alternative.

1. This learning Resource was:
   1. Extremely interesting
   2. Interesting
   3. Somewhat interesting
   4. Uninteresting
   5. Boring

2. This Learning Resource was paced:
   1. Much too fast
   2. A little too fast
   3. Just right
   4. A little too slow
   5. Much too slow

3. I learned:
   1. A great deal
   2. Some
   3. Not very much
   4. Nothing

4. This Learning Resource was:
   1. Very clear
   2. Clear
   3. Slightly confusing
   4. Very confusing

5. What I learned was:
   1. Very important
   2. Important
   3. Generally important
   4. A waste

6. Please write additional comments here.